The text that follows is an edited version of some of my remarks on the occasion of the unveiling of my portrait.at the NIH on January 15, 2003. I am grateful to Elias Zerhouni, the Director of the NIH, for organizing and hosting the ceremony and for suggesting that I put my informal comments into a written form.

--- Harold Varmus, February 1, 2003

This is a very happy event for me, in part because I like the painting that has just been unveiled and in part because I am pleased that it will hang at the NIH. After all, this is the place where, as a research fellow, I was shaped as a scientist in the 1960s, and where, as the NIH Director, I was given a chance to help shape science in the 1990s. I am also pleased that my image is recognizable, not only to others but to me, and that the artist, Jon Friedman; my wife, Constance Casey; and so many friends and colleagues have been able to join us for this occasion.

My objective today is to speak briefly about the portrait's backdrop, not about my own image, because that backdrop---Jon's inspired rendition of Jacques-Louis David's famous painting of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier and his wife, Marie-Anne Pierrette Paulze---says a great deal about what I would like my image to connote.

When Jon and I decided to put this complex painting in the background, we had several goals in mind.

Perhaps most significantly, the Lavoisier portrait celebrates science and its relationship to many things I value highly in my own life. The entire picture is a testament to the **close links between science and art**. This is, of course, apparent in both the greatness of the painting itself and its purpose--- to represent one of the most important scientists in history, the man who discovered oxygen and helped to establish chemistry as a rational, experimental activity. The painting is undeniably lush and beautiful, with richly brocaded table coverings and delightful clothing and coloring, ribbons and hair-styling. It also shows in an artful way the implements of science, the flasks and other gadgets that allowed Lavoisier and his students to do both basic and applied work on topics ranging from the principles of combustion to the testing of gunpowder. An additional homage to art is not

included here but is in the original portrait: a folio sitting behind Mme Lavoisier is believed to contain either sketches she made for classes she is known to have taken with David or her drawings of laboratory equipment that formed the basis for several lithographs found in her husband's writings.

David's painting also portrays the important **association of science and words**. Lavoisier is shown, not in his laboratory, but apparently at work on his famous book, *An Elementary Treatise on Chemistry*, which was published in 1789, the year after the painting was done. The writing and mode of publication of scientific information have also been central to my career.

David also shows **science as a component of a marriage**. Marie-Anne Paulze, who later came to be widely known for her beauty, charm, and talent, married Lavoisier when she was only 13, after repudiating her family's efforts to engage her to a much older and unattractive nobleman. As Lavoisier's wife she helped in the laboratory, made illustrations for his papers, and is shown here in the classic pose of the muse. It has been my own good fortune to be married to an equally attractive and accomplished woman, although I have had much more help with words than with drawings or experiments. But I don't want to push this parallel too far. In her book about David, the novelist and art historian Anita Brookner sees in the portrait suggestions of difficulties in the relationship between Lavoisier and his wife: 'A hint of wistfulness in her face, a hint of impatience in his, indicate a domestic world with an internal life as dense as the air in the glass bubble on the floor.'

Perhaps the most dramatic and relevant relationship implied by the backdrop of the Lavoisier portrait is **the link between science and politics**. During my time at the NIH (and now as well), I have emphasized the importance of bipartisanship in attempting to secure the future of our beloved institution. But Lavoisier's life---and death---illustrate the dangers of bipartisanship. He was a republican and a servant of the revolution, but he was also in charge of the nation's supply of gunpowder and a member of the land-owning, tax-collecting body known as the Farmers-General. When he was suspected of allowing a shipment of gunpowder to reach a group of royalists in 1789, riots broke out in Paris, he was nearly killed, and he and David agreed that it would be unwise to display the newly completed portrait at that year's exhibition of new art. Then, in the bloody days of 1792, he was tried by the revolutionary tribunal with about 37 other Farmers-General,

including his father-in-law, sentenced to death, and executed on the guillotine with the others on August 5, 1794. On that day, his friend LaGrange wrote in his diary: 'It took only a moment to sever that head; perhaps a century will not be sufficient to produce another like it.' (Fortunately, the NIH Institute Directors and I were never treated this badly by any Congressional committee.)

A second---more pedestrian, but more tangible---set of reasons for placing Lavoisier's portrait behind my own image was based on the physical fact of the portrait in my past and current life. Most obviously, a large part of the portrait---the part included in a poster advertising the David retrospective exhibited in Paris in 1990---has been on my walls in San Francisco, Bethesda, and New York, where I (and my colleagues and visitors) have spent many hours under its spell.

Furthermore, the real portrait can now be seen at what I like to think of as the other end of the street on which I live (East 84th Street in New York City), at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the first large room just at the top of the grand staircase; indeed it is rare for me to go to the Met without stopping by for at least a very brief visit. Moreover, for fifty-two years, the portrait was hung in a place that would have been practically in the view from my current office on the first floor of Memorial Hospital---in the library of Founder's Hall at Rockefeller University, whose grounds are visible from my windows on York Avenue.

Strangely, the portrait---or the legacy derived from it--- is virtually a part of the Tri-Institutional Research Program, a cooperative effort in research and training that joins Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Rockefeller University, and the Weill-Cornell Medical School. As I learned from files at the Metropolitan Museum, the painting made its way to New York through fortuitous events in the mid-1920s. Dr. Graham Lusk, then a senior member of the Cornell Medical School faculty, was having lunch in the south of France with a family descended from the Lavoisiers when he noticed the portrait on the wall and asked if the family might be willing to sell it. Upon learning that it could be purchased, Dr. Lusk dispatched his son with a letter to John D.Rockefeller, Jr., who was then sailing incognito on a yacht in the Mediterranean. Intrigued by the prospect of acquiring a painting by David, Rockefeller traveled to the Lavoisier family house and bought the work for what is estimated to be about a million dollars. Only after he was reassured of the quality of Lavoisier's scientific work, however,

was he persuaded to permit the painting to hang at his beloved Rockefeller Institute.

In making the gift to the Institute, Rockefeller stipulated that if the painting should ever be sold, the proceeds could be used to establish an endowment to support the salaries of distinguished faculty and students. After the painting was acquired by the Met in 1977 (for an alleged four million dollars from the Wrightsman Fund), annuities from the endowment have been used to support two remarkable scientists, Norton Zinder and Maclyn McCarty, and four students or fellows training at what had become Rockefeller University.

Finally, my remarks today would be incomplete if I did not comment on a third theme, one inherent in all portraits, but especially perplexing and poignant in the case of David and Lavoisier: the relationship between the artist and the subject. Lavoisier is believed to have been introduced to David through a mutual friend, Andre Chenier, the poet and revolutionary on whose life Umberto Giordano based a famous 19th century opera. (In the club to which all three men belonged, science was viewed as a rational basis for forming a new society, and Chenier had composed poems in which art and science marched in unison.)

Little is known about the circumstances that prompted the portrait, although there is reason to believe that Mme Lavoisier had her own ideas about how her husband should be portrayed and that she tried to communicate them to David through an intermediary. In carrying out this work, it is unlikely that David thought he was performing a favor for a friend---the one certain fact about its provenance, established from a receipt in David's own handwriting, is that Lavoisier paid David a royal sum, seven thousand livres, enough for a large portrait of a king.

The unhappy fate of Lavoisier has prompted considerable speculation about a possible love triangle. As a Commissioner of Public Safety, David would have been expected to have jurisdiction over political executions in 1794, although there is no direct evidence that he signed a directive to send Lavoisier to the guillotine or was presented with any alternative course of action. In the painting itself, Mme Lavoisier looks directly out towards the artist, while her husband looks at her, adoringly or wistfully, and the folio of sketches mentioned earlier may have been a tribute to the bond between David and Lavoisier's wife. But all we know for certain is that Mme

Lavoisier's company was valued by many suitors after her husband's death and that she was briefly and unhappily married to another scientist, the British engineer, Count Rumford, in 1805. If there was an amorous relationship between David and Marie-Anne, it has been hidden from posterity.

My relationship with Jon Friedman has been much less complex, although continually interesting and enjoyable. Jon first came to my attention as the originator of the striking portrait of Frank Press, a former president of the National Academy of Sciences, now hanging in the Academy on Constitution Avenue. Then he was warmly recommended by my friend and NIH colleague, Maxine Singer, whose portrait for the Carnegie Institution was recently completed by Jon. From the time of our first meeting and the opportunity to view his extensive work as portraitist, landscape painter, and sculptor, I have admired his character and talent. Our relationship has also been enhanced by our agreement about the plan for the portrait and by his respect for my time (he did nearly all his work from photographs taken during one relatively brief session with a hand-held camera). Furthermore, our relationship has involved no marital intrigue---he is happily married to a talented writer, Joanne Barkan, who is also in the audience today. Finally, the outcome has been a happy one: I love the portrait, the NIH has paid the fee, and my head is still attached to my body.